

I'm Asieh Ebrahimi, specialising in literature and translations. I'm a teacher and translator from English to Farsi.

During research I came across the rich and complex work of Muhammad A. Al Mahdi, who was editing 50/Fifty DZ with Mrs. Kolei at the time, a magazine used in higher level English training at universities and schools throughout the MENA region. On my request he was kind enough to offer some guidance on his work as well as professional advice on specific projects. When I proposed this interview to him he was initially less than enthusiastic but eventually agreed as we got to know each other. The interview reproduced here is in fact the condensed summary of extensive conversations over a time period of several months during which we formed a personal bond. Though he occasionally declined, for specific reasons, to elaborate on some questions such as, for instance, his role in the Egyptian uprising of 2011 (on which he commented in some detail in private conversation), he readily answered most of the questions I posed, responding to them with openness, in a frank and candid manner, and with the calm and patient interest characteristic of him.

I am proud to state that this is the only interview Mr. Mahdi has granted to anyone in 14 years.

When and how did you start writing?

Spring 1984. To be even more precise, on March 11, 1984. I'm able to answer this question with great accuracy because the poem is preserved and dated. It happened on my way back from school. I was in form 3 then, 8 years old, going on 9. At that time our classes would be over at 11.45. It would take me 15 minutes to arrive home and the poem came to my mind mid-way. So I can reliably state that I wrote my first poem on March 11, 1984 at 11.53 am. It took about 7 minutes to complete it. So I finished around 12 o'clock at noon, high noon, as the expression goes, just a few seconds before reaching the door. The way it came to me was rather like reading from a book. I used to recite poetry at school events and later on in youth theatre groups. I used to be involved in acting. So I was used to reciting poetry. Only, this time it was like reciting from an imaginary book. As I came in, I told my grandmother: "Imagine, a poem came to my mind on my way here!" and she said: "Can you recite it?" "Yes", I said, and I recited it. Now, my grandmother, who spent a lot of her time reading, always had a very sure feeling for style. She'd always know, when it came to books, what was good literature and what didn't qualify, what was worth reading and what wasn't. She'd open a book in the middle and say: "This one is well written. I'm going to enjoy reading this", or "This isn't clean work. I'm going to throw it away." She was convinced that if a book was readable, it will be readable in its entirety. A book that hasn't managed to exert any fascination on the reader towards the middle she would pronounce as a waste of time as a whole. We're rural working class, landless peasants and proletarianised peasantry migrated to the cities. My grandmother hardly saw a school. But her love of books had made her absorb the knowledge of her time, develop her reading skills and acquire an expert feeling for style. Anyway, as I read the poem to her she was listening with great attention and when I was done, she said: "Write it down. And mark the date. There is true poetry in this. It's beyond you and that is what really marks the poet: transcendence. The mystery of knowledge beyond yourself and beyond your years." In Islamic cognitive theory this is known as *ishraq*. Empirical cognition beyond the scope of average, previously available experience.

Were there any specific influences, any role models, which helped you find your own style, your language and literary concept?

Yes. Naturally. As Goethe used to say, we all, in being ourselves, are inherently the product of all that went before us. All the experiences, all the ideas, all the patterns of thought, all the modes of expression. Ah... as a young boy, a very young person, say, who is setting out on the adventure of writing, if one is serious, one realises from the onset that there is a craft aspect to the trade, that the writer is like a sculptor, or like one weaving a carpet: you got to know how the material is to be carved into shapes, how the seams and the strings go together. So you have to carefully study the work, the handcraft of those who are masters, those who excel in what you are trying to do. And you will instinctively choose those who are closest to you in approach and disposition, whose inner world and aesthetic concept are closest to your own. Those are the models you'll look up to. Role models and cases in point. In the different languages, there were different influences. When I wrote in English, I was heavily influenced by Robert Burns. In my German poems of that period you can clearly perceive the echo of Goethe and Schiller, the German classics, also where poetic license is concerned, a concession I tended to make use of quite heavily in those days, and in the general aesthetics of their language. A parallel influence came from the cinema, from the French Nouvelle Vague, with the perspective and the narrative style of Chabrol and ... "Tirez sur le Pianiste", comment déjà ... Truffaut, with "The Witness" and such – maybe I watched some films that weren't entirely age-appropriate – and there was the influence of Aznavour and Jacques Brel, whose records I would play like twenty times a day. Moustaki as well. "Le jeune facteur est mort" - ya Allah! One of my early influences was Pomyalovsky. Then there was Tarkovsky and Parajanov. In '88 "Ashiq Qerib" was shown on TV. In their films I recognised a mode of expression I had first encountered in my grandmother's story telling: the keen, dreamlike images, the surrealistic power, the flight of metaphors truer than words, the acute actuality of the surreal. I wasn't apt then to use those stylistic devices in my own work. But the images of "Ashiq Qerib", Tarkovsky's rain in closed rooms, "Tsvet Granaty", "Sayat Nova", that is, and "Dreams that Money can Buy", the nightingale motif especially, have remained with me throughout my life. I also owe much to Shadi Abd-as-Salam, to Shahin, to the great works of Indian cinema, to the scope and the expressive mode of Wagnerian opera, to which I had an inherent attraction. My poetry owes to the Persian masters, to Khomeini, to Orhan Veli, to Indian raga. James Baldwin. Langston Hughes. Senghor. Pasolini. Cocteau. Kawabata, in a way. Adachi and Mishima both, in their very different ways, huh... Achebe. Mariama Ba. Garcia Lorca. Jiang Qing's model operas – which are immortal works of art that are going to be discovered and rediscovered again. Ursula K. LeGuin's "Dispossessed" and Lem's "Solaris", which I consider to be the supreme achievements of Science Fiction. The visual aesthetics of Shirin Neshaat have had a major influence on my own aesthetics and imagery. The exquisite social realism of Jack London, of course. Anne Frank and Alice in Wonderland. In my mid-teens Brecht became the principal, dominating influence. In my twenties, Muhammad Al Fauturi. Later in my adult life, I read a lot of Herman Hesse, a lot of Kafka, and I met Mitzi Jackson, who had a major impact on me. I think we both had a formative influence on each other. More recently I met Gauri Mayekar, who in thought and image, both in the poetic and in the photographic sense, is proving to be a major influence of the present. My ultimate challenge as a poet, my central theme, my ultimate measure, has always been the Song of Songs.

You're widely read!

The writer has to be a reader in the first place. I'd read every book I could get my hands on. Even at the age of 3 I was never seen without a book in my hands. My fascination with books was so deep that I taught myself to read long before I entered school. I'd point at the letters and ask people: "What is this letter? And together with that letter, what does it become?", etc. So I managed to become more or less

fluent. Of course, I had been read to as a child but that was never enough to me. I longed to be an independent reader so I would be able to explore any book on my own, at any time. In later years I noticed that my father was a very eclectic reader as well. If he found a book in front of him, he'd pick it up, regardless what it was about.

I understand your talent was recognised at an early age and you received a lot of guidance and promotion on the part of state institutions?

Yes, that was connected with the fact that I had been established as highly gifted and had been undergoing all those psychological tests to make sure it was a permanent disposition and not just a temporary leap, as it sometimes happens in the development of young children. That in itself generated enough attention for my talents to be recognised and promoted, from an early stage and in any way possible. In these terms, I owe a lot to the GDR, to its educational policies, its school system, its commitment and deep interest in the development of the individual child, its promotion of the gifted. To the solidarity, the hospitality, the internationalism of the socialist world. Imagine me in Aida or Deir Al Balah, or Jabaliya, for that matter, under Israeli rule or in one of those eternal refugee camps run by the glorious Hashimites. As it was, I was given the choice between a school specialised in music and the arts, which was open to anyone interested, and a school specialised in languages and limited to the highly gifted. Apart from the fact that elitist thought didn't sit well with my father, and the idea irritated me as well, it was felt in the family that where languages were concerned there was sufficient exposure to various languages within the family itself and our circle of acquaintances, so that could be provided internally, while music and the arts – always of greater interest to me than language in itself, despite my pre-school obsession with the roots of words – wasn't represented to the same extent. Everyone in our family played a musical instrument but where literature, writing skills or music theory was concerned, that required outside training.

But you were also performing your poetry at public events and you were corresponding with the Ministry of Culture.

Yes. I started with youth theatre groups – and I continued being involved in those, signing, acting, often as a conferencier, which is a compere, a Master of Ceremony, right into my mid-teens, even though I had lost interest in those things by then, but they were obligations I had to meet – I and from performing the works of others I went on to include poems and little scenes of my own, until at some stage there was enough interest in those to allow me to come up with my own programmes. But the key to all that was my being part of the theatre group. You see, I used to have the ability to remember more text than anybody else was able to, and I would be word-perfect. Due to this fact I always got the roles with the most text and that contributed to my being seen as a talent. When my writing was noticed, the various institutions of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education gave me training, feedback and active support in the field. That's correct. Especially the director of our school and my teacher in literature and history -but also the Alma Mater Lipsiensis- helped to bring me to the attention of the higher levels, as it were.

At what age did you know you would choose writing as a profession?

It was clear to me at age 12. Initially my interest lay with the performing arts, with the theatre. But as soon as I had began to be involved in writing, the question arose which of the two would take priority, and by 1987 the issue had been resolved and there was no longer a question. I would use every free minute to write and anything else seemed a waste of time I increasingly resented. I took care to curb the level of my performance in high jumping, being just good enough not to be suspected of deliberately

underperforming, threw in a few blunders in gymnastics so I could get out of the championships and quit the film club I had going at the time so I would be able to dedicate all my time to developing my writing skills. The only thing I couldn't get out of was the theatre.

You were especially close to your teacher in literature.

In literature and history, yes. I can say, I believe, that she was the most important person in my life from the age of 12 to the age of 16. And I can say, in all modesty, that I too had a not entirely insignificant impact on her in those years. She was the one who would work with me and be there at all times. She was my most immediate audience and my most devoted critic. You see, the first people who would see a new text I had written were a close friend of the family, who was a lecturer at the Alma Mater Lipsiensis, and his wife – and then, to the largest extent, it would be my teacher in literature and history. With her, I formed a perfect symbiosis, a perfect synchronicity of thought and aesthetics that drew us very closely together. I developed a great protectiveness towards her and at some point I would help her out where she was falling short, I began to handle situations for her, to take charge in a way, and she would turn to me for advice, especially with regard to the very complex political questions of the time.

You were a leader in the socialist youth.

A leading functionary at regional level, yes. Politics was part of our background and I took a natural interest and had an informed understanding of it.

Yet, your writing, your poems from that time especially, does not sound like you espoused the official line. If I get the translations right, you were showing the industrialised world as narrow and unhappy, unfree...you were criticizing professional discrimination against women in a state that took pride in espousing gender equality, calling into question the reality of that claim...you were criticizing the social attitude towards rape and sexual abuse of women as focused on notions such as shame and public embarrassment rather than the actual pain of the victims... you expressed bitter, sarcastic criticism of the realities of life in the GDR... you voiced passionate concern with the freedom of the individual and you denounced the repression of the 1989 protests, likening them to the repressive acts of capitalist regimes...

Yes...that's a way of looking at it. I was no dissident. It would be ridiculous to suggest that. I was passionately committed to the same principal ideas and core values the state was committed to. But loyalty means criticism, principled and sharp criticism, in the first place. He who is uncritical is disloyal. He's a self-serving hypocrite. There was no shortage of that sort of people, to be sure. But I always felt that those are the ones to get rid of. Careerists and sycophants, administrative bureaucrats, are the sand in the wheel of time. Patience towards such tendencies is an unpardonable weakness. It's suicidal. A keen and unsentimental view for the realities on the ground and principled criticism come first, second and last. It was in this sense that I expressed anger and dissatisfaction in aggressive terms when and where necessary. I never shared the 20th century's superenthusiasm for industrialisation, especially not where it went at the costs of the agricultural sector and especially not where it determined the aesthetics of life. I was, and am, convinced that economically, a strong and self-sufficient agricultural sector is the backbone of every functioning, resilient economy and aesthetically, there is the need for a strong counterbalance to the industrial alienation and the bleakness of the outlook it produces. It is obviously beneficial to employ modern technology where large portions of land are to be cultivated and where they are appropriate to size and condition – but where the soil

ceases to be the mother of life and becomes an industrial resource, where crop and cattle cease to be the sacred children of that mother, where the inalienable rights of all living creatures are no longer perceived, there humanity forfeits its own birth right. There, institutionalised alienation sets in. There, it becomes lethal. There, the processes of life and production are paralysed in a rigor mortis. Where spirituality and creativity perish, there life itself must perish. You see, an ant or a cow or a camel are representative parts of the whole in a way humanity, due to its position in the cycle of life, can never hope to be. The human intellect, to fulfil its evolutionary mission, has to step outside of this holistic existence. That's why empathy, to the human intellect, is a much stronger necessity than it is to the animal, the plant or the stone which cannot be separated from the whole, while the human condition is innately one of separation. To the human intellect, empathy is therefore the most vital component. It is the essential quality enabling humanity to fulfil its task. You were alluding to a poem of mine from 1987 – 1987 was a key year in my development as a writer, as I was then expanding the scope of my topics to include more complex issues and searching for appropriate forms to deal with them – a poem called “Tragic Legend”, which was an attempt to psychologically narrate an imaginary series of sexually motivated murders. That had nothing to do with the GDR as such. It was rather based on Jack the Ripper and historical cases of that kind. That's a case in point to illustrate the influence of the Nouvelle Vague. It's a ballad exploring the attitudes and responses of the murderer, the investigator, the press and the general public. It does indeed repeat, in an ironic manner, the stereotypical sentiments of female seductiveness, negligence in guarding the daughters of the house, anti-social, passion-driven, almost 'guiltless' masculinity, portraying the police as unimaginative bureaucrats, the press as an unscrupulous, exploitative manipulator and ending in the statement that though the intensity of the pain is great, the intensity of the shame is beyond limit. The setting and characters suggest a Western or perhaps even more a Middle Eastern setting. Where gender equality is concerned, yes, there were obvious gaps between constitutional rights and practical realities. What bothered me was that that was simply taken for granted.

In a 1989 article you called for "drastic, courageous and irrevocable change" and advocated the legalisation of the opposition.

The opposition then was primarily the New Forum. That was prior to autumn 1989. The New Forum, on the whole, was a conscientious, constructive opposition who raised a lot of issues which absolutely needed to be raised and from the discussion of which the whole country would have benefited. The opposition of that time in no way envisaged the overthrow of the socialist government but was committed to the improvement of its structures, to the necessity of repositioning and redefinition. That must be pointed out here. Western powers and pro-Western groups were only able to come in when the government responded with repression. The echo of repression is extremism and the positions that will obtain under the circumstances of repression are extreme positions. Such is human nature. The question of federation with the FRG, for instance, was never raised by the original opposition and was, in fact, strongly rejected by them when it was raised towards the end of that year. But by then they were no longer in control of the situation. No internal power was. This too is a typical pattern. In the GDR, like in many countries where socialist and anti-Imperialist revolutions had been victorious, the initial steps had been taken and initial major achievements had been made. Since those seemed, or were, immense at the time and under the circumstances and were remarkable when compared with the situation in countries where that had not yet been the case, the first steps were taken for the ultimate achievements and the intention was taken for the deed. It was always: “See how far we have come”, until people just couldn't hear it anymore, but never: “See how far we still have to go”. There will always be people who have got what they wanted and are a just a bit too satisfied with it, so much so that they lose perspective – and sight of those who haven't got it just yet. Such people grow into bureaucrats. Leave them in office for too long and you are going to see stagnation, and after that a reversal of the

progressive trend. Any post-revolutionary society, and a socialist one by definition, is by nature a hybrid society, a societal formation which has inherited the structures, economy and psycho-ideological superstructure of the order it has overthrown and is therefore characterised by two opposing currents. This will at some point necessitate a decision – either back to the old system or forward to new shores, out of the crisis, to which a return to the old structures is only an apparent solution, a fake solution, because it will only lead back to the old cycles, which produced and necessitated the revolution in the first place – and which will do so again. As to the 1989 poem you referred to, it is difficult to deal with a government that perceives every major criticism, any fundamental critique, as hostile. That is an isolationist position to take, and I cannot warn enough against taking such a position. It is a source of vulnerability that *will* be taken advantage of. Maximum advantage, I can assure you. People will stop taking government seriously once this is the position it takes. In this way, its basis within is lost without this even being noticed, and those forces which are truly hostile, internally and externally, will have free reign. You see, the primary, long term objective of any government, apart from the practical tasks that form the conditional aspect of its *raison d'être*, should and must be to systematically prepare the masses for effective self-governance. By 1989 Honecker had only recently emerged from hospital -and in the previous year he had spent more time in hospital than he had been able to spend in office- and did not have a very accurate picture of what was actually happening. I can tell you that his health was extremely fragile and it was quite a shock to see what state he was in. He was in no position to form an appropriate response but he was acutely aware that Gorbachev was willing to sacrifice the GDR in his bid for conciliation with the United States and had entered into separate negotiations with both the Americans and the FRG. He clearly saw how the USSR had at that time already entered the stage of self-liquidation as far as the inner dynamic of its political thought and economic policies was concerned. His approach was characterised by this uneasy realisation and by his desperate determination to resist this tendency, while Mielke was obviously pursuing a strategy of escalation with the aim of simply withdrawing once things came to a head, in keeping with KGB directives at the time, in order to effect a change of government. Gorbachev needed a GDR government that was compliant and with whom, if this were to be decided, liquidation would be smooth going. All those things were in the air in 1989 and I dare say this has been on the table since 1988, as far as I could gather from remarks, allusions and political attitudes. I was denouncing this strategy in my poem.

You had met people in government?

Yes.

Have you ever personally met Gorbachev?

No.

You seem not to have seen him in a very positive light?

Gorbachev was the darling of the West. He had a lot of sympathy in a lot of countries but in the USSR, where his policies had actually been implemented, he has never been popular.

Your poem is very strong. The statement is laconic and acid. Did you experience any repercussions because of it?

No. My teacher read this poem in class. She actually distributed copies of it, saying that “this exceeds the quality of anything published in the ND [official state press] at this point in time”. I was warned at a family reunion by an aunt of mine to 'watch what I write' but I didn't give a damn and I suffered no

repercussions.

How old were you then?

15 years by the Hijra calendar, 14 by the common era.

Wow! It is obvious that philosophy and political thought have been a part of your art from a relatively early stage, probably in response to the circumstances of your life. But has it always been like this?

Yes, rather. Already my first poem had a political aspect. In my first years of writing I was greatly inspired by nature. By the forests of my childhood, by the memory of the tropical landscapes of my first years of life, by the Middle Eastern landscapes that ran through the family memory, inherited memory. So these formed the major part of my earliest writing, with a strong emphasis on the freedom that lies in the oneness with nature, but politics – and love, for that matter – were themes that have been present in it from the beginning.

How do you see the relationship between art and politics?

Art has been more often adversely affected by politics than politics has been by art. The artist cannot ignore the political realities to which his art is a response. But to confuse the one with the other would have a fatal effect on both quality and authenticity. Converting art into a vehicle of day-to-day politics inevitably damages its integrity. Politics is by definition a compromise. It is the art of responding, by the means available, to the circumstances given. Of responding in such a way as to mitigate damage and advance via necessary detours towards a long-term objective. Art is the exact opposite. Where politics cannot be absolute, art must be. Where in politics one cannot pursue an absolute end by absolute means, in art one must strive to achieve exactly that. Where reflection, vision, psychological depth is concerned, art must go much further than politics can at any given point in time. Art must go beyond the limitations of politics. It must base itself on the questions of the day in such a way that the universal character of these emerges and is emphasised, so their treatment becomes at once actual, immediate and timeless. That's what I mean when I say that we must build our house of stone. Art can never be apolitical but it cannot be a mere instrument of politics either. It can and must contribute to political life and thought but it cannot be owned by it. It cannot enter into a seamless affiliation with it, as it would then be subject to limitations and concerns it should by definition be able to transcend. During my years in active politics art allowed me to express what I could not have expressed as a politician. Art allowed me to critically examine, to question, the concepts, ends and means by which my political life was determined, and that is really the purpose of art, or one of its principal purposes, at least. During my years in politics, art helped me to retain my sanity. It helped me to stay true to myself and to broaden my vision.

You are also a religious scholar. You were an Imam and marjaa. You were given the title of mujtahid [decision-making expert]. The question might be strange but: what is your relationship with religion?

Not an easy question. There is religion and religion. If I were asked about my relationship with Allah, the answer could have been an easy, happy and straightforward one. But religion is a different matter. You see, religion is the in-depth dimension of philosophy. It is also its cradle, and it is the cradle of critical perception, creative thought and scientific inquiry. It must be looked at against this context and be perceived in these terms primarily. Otherwise it becomes counterproductive. I have said much about

the spiritual-cultic aspect of the human psyche and its reality as manifested in the need for it. But I'm opposed to a religiosity that motivates the oppressed to reconcile themselves with their state with view to heavenly rewards, or the poor to reconcile themselves with their poverty because it is holy, or willed by God or whatever. I'm opposed to a religiosity that divides where it should unite, that limits where it should broaden and inspire. I'm against a religiosity that is unable to relate to anything outside of its own framework and I'm against a religious doctrine that builds walls around itself and proclaims: "This is how it is today, this is how it will be tomorrow and this is how it shall be forever." I'm against a religiosity that petrifies. I'm against a religiosity that is based on blind obedience of whoever it is who is in command. I'm against 'unpolitical' religion. I'm against a 'religious' thought that sanctifies the arms of the oppressor. I'm against a religiosity that fuels resentment and sectarian violence in order to conceal the true contradictions. Again, I'm against a concept of religion that keeps exploiters and parasites in power, replaces scientific thought and inquiry with dogma and divides those who are innately connected by the same concerns, needs and basic interests. In short, I'm against the religion of the bourgeoisie and its petty bourgeois parrots. Just as I'm against their secularism, which represents exactly the same things. I'm against the conversion of religion into an idol. Under conditions like our contemporary ones, where no effort and no expense is spared to promote and institutionalise each and all of these trends, that is what the religious mainstream is felt to represent today. Denial. Reaction. Opium for the masses. My religion, my Islam, my universalist spirituality has nothing in common with any of that. It denounces and actively opposes this travesty. I'm no idealist thinker either, in the philosophical sense; I'm a pantheist and a historical materialist. I represent the tradition of Hallaj and Ibn Arabi, its critical development and most consequent application.

And you're arguing from rather Marxist positions...

Of course. Islam is a social revolution, in the same way as Christianity is a revolutionary doctrine under the conditions of an all-powerful Roman colonial rule, in the aftermath of two failed uprisings. It has a class character. Religion has a class character and is a response to class contradictions, as is the way in which it develops, its different streams and currents, the way in which it is practised and sanctioned or opposed, the question who resorts to it and in which way and to what end. That is what decides everything.

What is your perception of truth, then?

Regardless from what position, on what premises, from what religious context you approach reality, ultimately it is the same truth, the same objective reality, that we all encounter, that we all must deal with and which therefore we all undertake to interpret. That is essential knowledge. None of us 'owns' it. None of us has an exclusive key to it. Yet, each of us holds a key, which lies exactly in the fact that it is the same objective reality we all undertake to interpret.

Would you say that this is a concept that exists within religious thought?

Yes, of course. It's a Vedic concept. It's a Quranic concept. We regard the Quran revealed as only a fraction, or rather an exegesis, of the Quran al asli, the actual Quran. The very notion of Islam in its original and primary meaning is based on this concept. Universalism is the inner core of every religion, while demarcation is a response to external factors. Of course, external factors are components of reality but they are conditional. They're products of relativity and are relevant only within relative frameworks.

You have been an editor since....

1999/2000, roughly speaking.

How did it come about?

It happened in response to requests. It was colleagues, for reasons of their own, regarding my style as exemplary or having some elements which they liked to incorporate in their own writing, which I never understood, since I ...well, I'm doing my best but I'm driven into the darkest moods when I see how short I'm falling of what I meant to express, how short the wretched reality of my writing falls of what it should have been, of what it was intended to be, how little I am actually able to say... Anyway, there were writers and journalists asking me to work with them on their texts, and I'd discuss questions of form and content with them and eventually ended up editing their work. At that time I still did the occasional journalistic job. But the first thing I edited was a screenplay. At certain times I would be quite busy with those things. And in 2011 Aziza El Kolei proposed to me to become the editor of 50/Fifty DZ, which she was about to launch. That brought years of very intensive, very challenging work. Because as an editor I was involved in every aspect of the publication and had to work with every single contributor, often in great detail.

50/Fifty DZ is one of your best-known projects. Under your mentorship and with the engaging graphic design of Mr. Bouzid, it became a very attractive magazine for both Middle Eastern and international audiences. Are there any plans to resume publication?

It was a great success in the region because it was based on a very effective concept. It brought together art, lifestyle and language. In addition to that, it included certain special interests such as medicine and pop technology, you know, apps and iPods and suchlike. So there was a really broad scope to it, put together in a handy format. That's one of the things that drew me in. Under my influence, we came to include philosophy and high art. I was able to win some of the most fascinating contemporary writers for the project, such as Mitzi Jackson and Regis Auffray. Another point of attraction was that readers could become contributors, that they could have their own articles and poetry included, which gave them the chance to work and interact with professionals. Publication was discontinued due to financial problems. I had always been very critical of a concept which heavily relied on outside funding while disregarding the need to create an independent revenue. You cannot do this in this day and age. Self-reliance is an absolute necessity, and not only in terms of liquidity. This is something I have often pointed out but funding wasn't a sector I was in charge of and so, in the end, I didn't prevail. I had staked a lot on that project, to be honest, and I offered to rescue at least part of the basic infrastructure by contributing personal funds but I was told that the damage was far larger than that and that it would be irresponsible of the magazine to accept an offer that might result in irreparable financial loss on my part, as there were outstanding payments, anyway. Daniela Mifsud tried to compensate for that by donating her own payments. There have been attempts to resume publication and there will be further attempts on my part.

I'm glad to hear that and I wish you luck.

Thank you.

If one looks at the scope of your professional involvement and at the various parts of the world

where you have been active, the picture that emerges is that of a very cosmopolitan personality. You have worked in various fields and positions as well.

From road construction to diplomacy, I've done practically everything. But there is a consistent pattern to it. I did what contributed to broadening the knowledge I needed and to the achievement of the goal I was pursuing at the time, and I did what generated the necessary funds to pursue it. Everything is connected with everything.

Where are you at home?

My home is four places, and there's no way of denying any of them its right or belittling the formative influence it has had on me: Jerusalem, Greater Accra, Limassol and The Hague. So, in the wider sense, it's the Middle East, Africa and Benelux. And, of course, the world of the Warsaw Pact states, which was the home of my childhood. Of the greater part of it, in any case. But the dervish says: "I'm from the realm of majesty/The universe cannot limit me." I'm a stone on a desert road. I'm a wave breaking ashore. I'm a tree in the jungle, of earthward and skyward roots. I live to bear witness to the states of this being. I live to bear witness, in authentic and transcendent perspective, to the times and the places I have seen.

In conclusion, allow me to address your concept of epic surrealism. What is epic surrealism? How did you come up with it?

Epic surrealism is a device to sharpen the focus of realism. It works with epic and surrealist techniques to connect the authentic description of the external world with the authentic reflection of the inner experience it evokes. You might call it an introspective analysis of reality from the specific to the general. One of the characteristics of the style is that narration works at different levels. Like epic theatre, it rejects illusion and is purely narrative in style. Like epic theatre, it uses v-effects to the maximum of their capacity. I think in its use of these it goes perhaps further than epic theatre itself, in that its entire surrealism is in essence a v-effect and a device to deepen the scope of psychological penetration. But unlike with Brecht, epic surrealism enthusiastically embraces the Shamanic roots of theatre and art. It makes use of psychedelic techniques and trance or dream states. In many ways, the concept is already manifest in Parajanov's approach to the cinema, and I will tell you that where the cinema is concerned, Parajanov's work is the peak of what can be achieved; it's impossible to go beyond Parajanov. And Parajanov already found it impossible to go beyond Tarkovsky. As regards epic surrealism, it can be said that it's not a form of surrealism but a form of realism – but then, surrealism itself is of course of a – heightened – form of realism. Unlike the so-called post-modern concepts, epic surrealism works with very strict narrative patterns, including leitmotifs, and requires a highly consistent structure. It has a strongly analytical focus. You could say it's active philosophy and active interpretation. Characteristically, it works with a divided stage, displays texts on screens, contains inbuilt references to acting, role play and theatrical performance and addresses the audience directly. Language and dialogues are non-naturalistic. You will note as well that it has a certain documentary quality, which it always retains.

I have been working with such stylistic elements and devices in "Nurit" already and I have been experimenting with them as early as '89/90. In the play that followed "Nurit", "A Cry in a dark Mirror", I used them more consciously, more with view to evolving a general approach, a general theory, and in "Death of the Birds" I already very deliberately employed them as a concept. For quite a while I had been working with two parallel approaches: poetic realism and epic surrealism, for which I had no word as yet back then. "The Legend of the Fire Monkey", which was written for the cinema, is an example of poetic realism, as a case in point. Some of my short fiction falls into that category as well.

But with “Cairene Delights” the decisive step in the direction of the epic surrealism theory was made, and it was while I was working on that novel that I coined the phrase. “Cairene Delights” parodically draws on the style of my earliest writings, satirising it, as it were, but in the process also reincorporating some of my early approaches, appropriating, or reappropriating, them with the knowledge and the skill of an adult. That was a definitive moment. There's a passage in “Cairene Delights”, for instance, that was originally drafted in '89/90. In this respect, much of my writing is a communication with myself across time. A communication with the world, the relativity, the generality, the causes and effects which express themselves in it, and it is to these that we are primarily referring when we are referring to the self, which, in the human way of looking at things, we call *ours* but which we never own entirely, whether we be aware of it or not. That's the inner dynamic of my thinking and writing: breaking through the time barrier, annihilating the dualism inherent in the traditional concept of present, future and past, and in our mechanistic perception of individual and society, of inner and outer world, respectively. Of course – to come back to one of your earlier questions – of course, my concept of art and literature corresponds to my philosophical concept. Philosophy as expression and interpretation of the world we live in and its realities, and via these, *its reality*, is the impetus that lies at the very core of art and literature, from their most trivial forms to their most advanced, and without that they wouldn't be worth much.

Sepazgozaram. Thank you very, very much.